

2-20-1979

Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Mario Pantano by Norma DiLibero

Mario Pantano

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Recommended Citation

Pantano, Mario, "Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Mario Pantano by Norma DiLibero" (1979). *Three Generations of Italians*. 31.

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE Mario Pantano

INTERVIEWER Norma DiLibero

DATE OF INTERVIEW 2/20/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Life in Italy as a child, in the service and married

Financial decisions and plans for America

Entering a new country with no money, relatives or friends

Examining the job market--saving money to send back home

Work and saving money so that the rest of the family could come

Arrival of family

Job change

Educating of children in U.S.

Death of first wife and second marriage

Fulfillment through children and grand children

Gratitude for living in U.S.

Oral History Interview

with

MARIO PANTANO, INTERVIEWEE

30 min.

February 20, 1979

Providence, Rhode Island

by Norma A. Di Libero, Interviewer

I am happy to introduce Mr. Mario Pantano, a retired insurance agent for Prudential Life Insurance Company. Mr. Pantano has led an active and rich life in America and today he is gracious enough to give us a deeper understanding of some of the struggles he encountered as a new immigrant to the shores of the United States.

INTERVIEWER: Will you tell me something of your childhood and family in Italy, where you were born, and where this village is located?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I was the only son in the family. My mother and father were born in the Town of Isola Dell'Iri in Provincia Fresinone. It is between Naples and Rome. My father and mother were very nice, but very poor, but there was love of the family. The only thing I can remember, my father, because of the work he used to do, he used to be out of town all the

years old when I finished the school and I started to do a little work around.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have to go into the service for Italy? How old were you? Were you trained for a job or skill while in the service?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, because I was the only son in the family, according to the law at that time, when the only son when he reached age twenty, you are suppose to go serve for three months. After three months then they let you go. But as it happened, when I was nineteen, I was transferred from the town I was born, my father went another town; the name of the town is Isernia, see, and my mother was there. When I reached Isernia, I was sixteen and one-half, see. I don't know nobody over there and my mother introduced me to somebody she used to know, because she was over there before me. Before I finished the school, my father let me stay at her sister's house one year. Then, when I graduate, then I went with my mother and father to Isernia, you know, over there. When I reached over there, they introduced me to this widow. She had two daughters. One was married and the other one was young. When I see this girl, she looked at me and I looked at her until 1911, we married each other. The name was Susie Marinnelli, a wonderful girl.

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But at the time I happened to be twenty years old and she was in the family way. Then, I asked the government to transfer, instead of to go on age twenty-twenty-one because she was in the family way, to give me one year. I went in the army in 1913; I was over there in 1914. And, I spent during the first World War, I spent close to six years in the army. And during the time when I was in the army, I was nominated cor-

INTERVIEWER: When you were discharged when did you go back to the Italian Army, for one reason or another, had

INTERVIEWEE: When I discharge I'll try to find a job to... I had my wife and two children and my second try my best to find a job you can support the family and I even like they call "scotto profetto" is this to vice-governor over here. I went and explained my situation, he asked me to make the application, I told him, "I haven't got too much education." He says, "I know what I do; you go over there because I know you can make it."

INTERVIEWER: Was this for Officer's Training? I went back

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Because I can not say no, I went over there. I spent four months over there in the school and after four months.....after six hundred applications, I was nominated 182. I was first nominated Second Lieutenant, and then

happy I was young, but six years in the army I learned a lot of things. I got the respon-

sibility to my name; I think a lot about my name. I don't want to be a millionaire, but I want to try my best to support my family. Now, I knew you don't like the idea because your sister married and the husband went to America and he forget the wife. Your brother was in America and he forget to answer to your mother. But me, I am a different kind of a man."

INTERVIEWER: When did you decide to come to America?

INTERVIEWEE: One night, we had a neighbor near my house. This particular night this woman was in my house. Because I used to know the two daughters. One of the daughters, I find out she went to America to marry somebody in America. And then I asked my wife, I want to ask this lady to give me the address of her daughter, and I want to go to the United States myself. She says, "Marie, you are crazy." "I got the responsibility. Don't you worry, I want to do my best, believe me. Give me a chance." And because at that time she find out I was an officer, she can't say yes or no. She says if you want to go I hope you don't forget us over here because they are your children.

INTERVIEWER: Who would support them while you were gone?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, the way I says before, her mother used to live with us. They used to work and make some kind of lace and then when I would come over

here I would try to get a job making macaroni. The first five years I used to make macaroni and send some money every month to her and at the same time I used to try to buy some furniture. You know, I wait for her to come over.

INTERVIEWER: How did you arrive here and how many days did the voyage take?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I left on the end of June, 1920 and I reached New York July 14th. From New York after two days I went from New York to New London by boat. From New London to Providence by train. When I reached Providence, it was about five o'clock in the morning. I went out of the station, I don't know how to say this, but somebody, I find out he was a taxi driver, he came over.... I'll give him the little piece of paper the lady gave to me, and I went over there to see this lady.

INTERVIEWER: Was this an Italian neighborhood that you arrived in?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. It was an Italian neighborhood, but one thing see, when I reach the address of these people, I suppose to see, were on vacation for two weeks and then another lady that had a boy my age, she says "come to my house, but I want to talk with my son first, if he likes the idea." And, I stay a week and a half at this lady's house.

INTERVIEWER: These were all total strangers then?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, completely strangers. I had no relations, no friends, no money, nothing...all alone.

INTERVIEWER: How long did it take you to find a job?

INTERVIEWEE: When this lady was on vacation came over, a day after, I tell the husband to see if he could find someplace to make macaroni. And he says yes, and I left Eagle Park, a section from Charles Street to Douglas Avenue and we went to Federal Hill. From Federal Hill, we find someone that made macaroni, by the name of Ferrucci, see. He offered me a job for sixteen dollars a week, working twelve hours a day, see. I accepted the job because there was nothing else to do and after a couple of months, I used to go from Federal Hill to Eagle Park walking back and forth, after spending twelve hours working.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you stay with the macaroni company in Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: I stay with the macaroni company.....but in the same time, one Sunday morning, I use to talk with some friends and one told me, why you want to work over there, its too far. There is another macaroni factory on Charles Street. It is about a mile from over here and it's more easy. I says "give me the name." He give me the name. I put it on a piece of paper and the next Sunday I

went over there, I made a mistake. Instead of going to Branch Avenue, I went to Charles Street. On the way to go to see him, three men who go to church and I hear them talk Italian and I says I look for the name of Santere, the macaroni factory. They said to me you mistake over here, come with me because the church is near there. This is about quarter of eight in the morning. I went to knock the door and after awhile I finish knocking a few times a woman came and asked "what are you looking for?" "I am looking for a job." "Your name is Santere?" She says to me "and you are looking for a job just on a Sunday morning?" I said "well I don't want to steal nothing....I'm looking for a job." "Well, wait a minutes, I'll go see what my husband has to say." She went to talk with the husband and he says "let him come in and wait until I dress up." After he dressed up he offered me a job for eighteen dollars a week instead of sixteen and I started working over there until one time I had my mind to learn my daughter, she was six or seven years old to teach her music. I had a chance to buy her a piano, see, and I says if you give me this piano I'll take it. After four or five years in 1926 I went to buy a piano on Michelejohn. There was a salesman there, he

used to be an insurance agent. I used to know him. And, he says "Marie, what do you do?" "Well," I said, "I work in a factory macaroni." He said, "you got the intelligence, why don't you work with the insurance?" I said, "I got no interest." He said he used to work with Prudential and the boss is Italian. Let me talk to him and come to see me. I went to see him and after two or three days....well, this is the address of Mr. Pusateri. Go over there and see what you can do.

INTERVIEWER: Is this how you found out about Prudential?

INTERVIEWEE: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: How long was it before your family came from Italy to America and did they all come at once?

INTERVIEWEE: The family, the way I says before, my wife was in the family way when I left Italy. In my house was my mother-in-law, wife and my son. In the month of October in the same year 1920, another girl was born. See, now there was four. I left in 1920 and in 1922 they came over here. But before they came over here, my wife used to write me right along that it was impossible. But one day, when I came out from work, I find a letter saying it is impossible to come-in over there. I had a piece of paper. I bought it with the bread in the store and I sat down, instead of

making something to eat for myself, I write a letter to the ambassador in Washington, Rolando Risci, his excellency. I explained all my situation and in two or three weeks he wrote me a letter back and he says I already called Naples to make sure your wife with the children leave immediately to reach you. In fact, after a month in a half that I write that letter, my family was with me.

INTERVIEWER: What accommodations did you have them find when they arrived here?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, the accommodation was this way. I was fortunate in one way. Because I used to belong to the society. When I was in the society, the name was Cesare Battisti, see, one fellow in that society, he was a carpenter and he built two tenement houses. When he find out that my family was coming from Italy, he don't want to rent the tenement upstairs. He saved it for me. In fact, he lost three months to save it for me. It was on Corina Street near Eagle Park. When my family come over and I want you to understand one thing. In Italy we was very poor, but honest people and I am proud to say it. But when my family come over and my mother-in-law find all new furniture, not rich furniture, but brand new, and she said, "Marie, how you done all this thing?"

I says, "I done it now and let's enjoy it."
After two years I was over here, my family was
over here and they enjoy everything.

INTERVIEWER: Did your children speak English when they entered school here?

INTERVIEWEE: No, absolutely not. My son was nine years old and my daughter was not even two years old. She was born in October, 1920. But my son after two or three months started to pick up the English when he went to school.

INTERVIEWER: When did you decide to change jobs and when did you find out about this Prudential?

INTERVIEWEE: When my daughter reached the age of six or seven, it was my intention to let her learn music. And, I went to a place that they sell the piano, called Micheljohn. A salesman over there, was a fellow I used to know because he comes from the same town my wife was born, Isernia. He was an ex-agent. Because, I understand, the business, he just cannot make, he left over there and started working over there, but when he find out I used to make macaroni, he told me, "Marie, why don't you try to sell insurance, because I know you can make it?" I knew a fellow, he is an Italian fellow, you gonna see him and maybe he will be able to help you. In fact, he'll give me the

address. When I went to see him, he don't give me the job right away, but he went in Eagle Park, the place I used to live and ask the people at the drugstore, and ask about me, about what kind of a person I was; if I got the good reputation and when I see him in the night, he was yes and no. Then the wife says to him, "Gus, give him a chance, don't you see this man wants to accomplish something." He says, "alright, you come Monday morning over there and I'll see the superintendent and then the superintendent says after he talkin to him, "this is your beek, see what you can do." My superintendent, Mr. Boyle told me.

INTERVIEWER: Did you sell insurance to immigrants only?

INTERVIEWEE: Everyone. But gradually, I knew it was my job to understand who pay me...it's not the Prudential, but my customers. Because I will try very hard to please my customers and respect 100% but one thing I like to open, when I reach this nation, at one time, six or seven months after, for one reason or another, they started talking, these people about insurance, things I never happen to hear before. When I find out I think it's my obligation to insure myself in case anything happen to me, I wanna protect my wife. But when I started working to the Prudential, the first

thing I do, I put that policy in my pocket and I used to go, because my English is a peer, and maybe now it's a peer. At that time I want you people to imagine, see, but I used to go talkin and says well it's not because I work for the Prudential, because I believe in insurance and this is the reason. When I come over this country, the first thing I done to protect my wife, I think it is your duty to buy it yourself. A little bit of a time gradually, I don't wanna say I was the best, but I try to do my best for the company.

INTERVIEWER: What difficulties did you encounter selling?
What transportation did you have selling?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, for the first two years there was no such-a thing as automobile, and I hope you people understand to walk on the farms, way up North Providence, Mineral Spring Avenue, from Centredale and all that farm was up in the back to Twin River. Just on the Saturday, I used to make that way. I started at seven o'clock in the morning and came back five o'clock in the night. Just on the Saturday to collect twenty-five cents, ten cents and one dollar, but little bit of the time the people started to like me because I used to respect them and gradually I did the best I can.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have to work on Sundays also?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, Sundays and nights. The insurance agent, he can spend one-half hours to two hours to convince a woman to buy twenty-five cent insurance, because he has got to go around to collect it. But at night you eat and you go see the people and this and that and even on the Sunday morning because on a Sunday morning you get a better chance to talk to people. In other words, you get to accomplish something in a hard way in order to get something.

INTERVIEWER: Did you urge your children to continue their education or go to work?

INTERVIEWEE: My son come over here, he was nine years old and he went to elementary school; he went to high school and then I sent him to Providence College. But one and one-half years after, for one reason or another, I find out he just don't care to study and he started to work. Because when he was a small boy, after school he used to go to the barber shop to a friend of mine and after that I opened up a barber shop for him.

INTERVIEWER: Where is the shop?

INTERVIEWEE: The first one was in North Providence near the church, Woodward Road and Mineral Spring Avenue and then the second one on Wickenden Street. Until today he is going to be next month, March

from 1934, forty-five years next month, he is going to be there.

INTERVIEWER: How about your girls, Mr. Pantane?

INTERVIEWEE: My daughters, one was born in Italy, and the other one was born over here in 1923. The one who was born over here she went to hairdresser. She's got the license as a hairdresser. The other one as I said before, I had a my mind to let her study music; I had two persons to come to teach her, but after a little while she did not want to do no more, but all the same she is a nice girl, so I can't complain.

INTERVIEWER: When did your wife die?

INTERVIEWEE: She come over here in 1922 and in 1941, one Saturday night we had a good friend of mine, we used to go on a Saturday night, we used to go on this friend of mine's house, or then they come over here. The name is Leonelli. In fact, one of the son is a professor at Rhode Island College. This particular Saturday night they come in my house and on a Monday morning, I went to work, when I come back, I find my wife near the sink. She come in and she started to cry. I says, "what's a matter, what's a matter?" She says, "I find something in my breast." When I hear this, I called Dr. Renschese, he used to be in the army with me. He

INTERVIEWEE: says "rush her over here." Over there he called another doctor, Dr. Cervese and Dr. Cervese said she has to go to the hospital right a way to be operated on. And she was operated on in 1941 until 1943, I knew what I go through, but I know I done the best I can. God call her and I got to say she was a wonderful lady. I will never forget her, but after two years I was a widow, my son, he was about thirty years old, he says, "Pa, you still have the age and if you find somebody you think is a good woman, we don't object." "I even told my two sisters." I find a woman, she was thirty-nine years old, single, Concetta Piccirilli and she lost her mother when she was young and she take care four, five, six brothers and sisters. She's working and taken care of the family. Through a friend of mine who happened to find her, she like me and I like her and the first thing you know, now it is thirty-four years, we get along nicely. She is very nice and she deserves everything.

INTERVIEWER: Mr. Pantano, tell me something about your grandchildren and how you were fulfilled through them.

INTERVIEWEE: Well, the ways I says, I had a son, he was sixty-five last August. He's got three sons; one is a graduate teacher, then he went to the School of Design. After he was graduated School of Design

INTERVIEWEE: he's got a big job as vice-president of a big corporation in Boston. He is a graphic artist. He has a wonderful job and I can be proud of him and the rest of the family. Himself, he has four daughters. He married a wonderful girl and they get along wonderfully and that's what pleases me the most. Another one, he is a doctor, in Worcester, Massachusetts and he married a nice girl, the name is King. They got three boys and the small one, he's got my name, Marie, he graduate as a teacher, but now he has a wonderful job on the state with the Rehabilitation office. The other two daughters, they married, they got the good families and one of the granddaughter's is an x-ray technician.

INTERVIEWER: It has been very informative speaking with you today and I greatly appreciate your time and effort Mr. Pantano. I wish you continued good health and happiness.

INTERVIEWEE: Before I close, I want to thank a million times to the United States of America to make me come over here and make me not to become a millionaire, no, give a the best I can with my family. And the Prudential Insurance Company too, I work hard, maybe I deserve, but one thing I know for a fact, every single the end of the month the Prudential send me a retirement check and me and my

While Mr. Pantano's reception in the United States was bleak without money, relatives or friends, he earnestly sought work in macaroni factories. For the first five years he worked first for the Ferrucci Macaroni Company on Federal Hill, twelve hours a day for sixteen dollars a week and later he progressed to eighteen dollars a week with the Santoro Macaroni Company on Luna Street.

After two years of eating bread and cheese, he saved enough money to have his wife, son and mother-in-law come to America. He had saved enough money also to purchase new furniture, not fancy, but new and they lived in a newly built tenement house on Corina Street. In Italy they were very poor but honest people. When his newly arrived family saw all his accomplishments, they were over-joyed.

Insurance and protection of wife and family was a new concept for Mr. Pantano. When he began selling insurance for Prudential Insurance Company to new immigrants, he proudly took from his pocket his own policy he had purchased for his family and as he says to a new prospect, "I believe in it."

Because Mr. Pantano had officer's training in the Italian Army, he displayed leadership qualities as an early immigrant, as a salesman for Prudential Insurance Company as a patriarch to his grandchildren. He was willing to take the risk and then he followed through with constructive and dedicated work.

In my one conversation with Mr. Pantano, I became aware that to succeed as a teacher, physician, lawyer, was to him ultimate success. He saw no value in going to college four years, acquire a masters in theatre and then become a professional clown as one grandson had. To him this was a total waste and did not represent success. I waited to hear about

this grandson in the tape when he spoke of the successes of his grandchildren, however, he purposely did not wish to record it.

Lastly, I was most touched by his sincere thanks as an early immigrant to the United States of America and to Prudential Insurance Company for giving him the opportunity to succeed in this vast land.